OUR BLIND GIRLS GO TO SCHOOL

by

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About four years ago the writer began turning her attention to the blind girls within our School. At that time we had just admitted a girl who had had considerable training in a Pennsylvania institution for the blind. Should not her education continue here? Perhaps there were others who were capable of profiting by similar training. When we had found five whom we thought suitable for a class for the blind we appealed to Miss Lydia Hayes, Chief Executive Officer, New Jersey Commission for the Blind. She came to our aid at once, and very fortunately sent us Miss Bertha Johnson, who was already interested in one member of our proposed class.

Miss Johnson came to us in October 1928, and her enthusiasm even on the first day was so great that she asked to give us more time in order to spend one hour teaching braille and one teaching hand work. As the class increased in numbers piano lessons were added for two of the group. Last October found us with ten blind or partially blind girls, so we formed two classes, and Miss Johnson now comes in the morning for the music lessons and remains for the classes in the afternoon. She is assisted by her guide, Mrs. Scull.

For more than a year they have met in one of the school rooms so that Tuesday becomes a real school day. One has only to drop in for a visit to realize how much real happiness is brought to the girls in this way. Their faces radiate joy and contentment and they are justly proud of their accomplishments. When, in emergencies, class has been omitted the news has been greeted with expressions of dismay. Summer vacations have seemed so long, and "When is Miss Johnson coming back?" is asked repeatedly as September days draw near.

Miss Johnson's own blindness has doubtless increased her understanding of the girls. Her teaching experience has been wide but has never before included the mentally handicapped.

obligation involves, first and foremost, the establishment of special classes for mentally and physically handicapped children who cannot receive adequate benefit from the instruction in the regular grades, and who, because of educational maltreatment or neglect, often become social and economic liabilities instead of assets to the State. In the public schools of this country only about 60,000 mentally retarded children are receiving special class training. If the public schools measured up to the White House Conference standards, this number would be increased to at least 450,000.

What steps must be taken in order to discharge our educational obligations to handicapped children?

(1) Divisions of special education must be established in state departments of education to direct and supervise the work of all public-school special classes and to supply to local school districts the psychological service required for the accurate differentiation and diagnosis of mentally handicapped and maladjusted children. Very few public school system possess the facilities needed for the scientific diagnosis of children who are mentally deficient or subject to mental or educational defects or maladjustments.

(2) The establishment of special classes for specified types of handicapped children should be made generally compulsory as has been done in the educationally advanced states. We cannot afford to allow handicapped children to become a threat to our social security because of educational and mental mutilation or neglect.

(3) These special classes should be partially subsidized by the state, provided the classes have been approved by a competent division in the state departments of education as to equipment, curricula, and the technical qualification of the teachers.

(4) Departments should be set up for the training of special-class teachers, psycho-educational examiners, and guidance workers. These departments should be jointly supported by the proper divisions in the state departments of education and by those institutions of higher learning which can supply the necessary clinical material and classes of handicapped children for observation and practice teaching.

She has met her new problem, however, with remarkable ease and rare insight. When asked recently if she would care to include in her class two children of rather low mental level, she did not hesitate a moment and when they entered class the next week she knew exactly how to meet their needs.

Perhaps if we tell you something about each girl you will know why we wish Miss Johnson could be with us every day instead of once a week:

GRACE is 26 years old and totally blind. She has a Binet (Hayes) score of 9-10 years. Before coming to this institution she had attended school and reached grade 3 at the age of 13. On admission in 1926 her eyesight was failing and glasses were of little help. Outside an institution she was utterly incapable of caring for herself. Although of a nervous temperament she is happy and contented here. She was tried on braille and learned seven or eight letters but did not like it. At first she was sensitive and suffered by comparison with others. When trying to do hand work she would become very nervous and her hands would perspire excessively. She was able to make a rush pattern for a stool but needed constant supervision to keep the work tight. Stringing beads for necklaces was more satisfactory and sewing and stuffing stocking dolls was fairly well done. She is now making tile mats, which she loves. She enjoys class and wishes it met more frequently.

MARY is 35 and totally blind from birth. She has a Binet (Hayes) score of 9-10 years. Before entrance she attended the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind where she learned American braille. Reports show that she was not able to do satisfactory hand work. In class she has learned to read and write revised braille. She writes to her sister, reads magazines, and enjoys children's stories. Tried on sewing she became very nervous and excited. Knitting is her only hand work at present. She has made sweaters, scarfs, little boys' suits, booties, caps, doll sets, coat hangers, and pen wipers.

When very excited Mary has been known to injure other children. Happily occupied she is contented and quiet. She never finds fault when she has to do her work over, and she keeps it clean. For her such occupation is real therapy.

EMMA is 21 years old with a Binet (Hayes) score of 16-17 and is totally blind. This condition developed soon after birth.

She attended the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind where she learned revised braille. She was not able to graduate from this school and could not qualify for the Industrial Home for the Blind in Philadelphia. Conditions in her home were such that it was not safe for her to remain there. Emma needs to be busy and is happy in the class. She has taken up the Moon type reading for the blind for something to do, has brushed up on contractions, and has taken up letter writing. She reads books and magazines from the Philadelphia Public Library. Her hand work is fair but she is apt to get it soiled. She has knitted a sweater, scarf, cap, doll set, coat hanger, pen wiper, lace, booties, has started crocheting and has done some sewing.

ELSIE is 21 years old and has a Binet (Hayes) score of 16-17 years. She is totally blind, having been so from birth. She learned to read and write braille and also braille music while at the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind. Home conditions were such that permanent institutional care was considered necessary and commitment here seemed to be the wise course because of her inability to progress in any institution for the blind.

In class she has done all kinds of hand work, but likes sewing least. She has made many knitted articles in plain and fancy patterns and learned to make bead necklaces very quickly. She is now learning crocheting and basket making. Her piano music has progressed well, and she has learned a number of pieces from memory. She is happy, sociable, eager to learn and to help others.

CARRIE is 23 years old and has a Binet (Hayes) score of 14 years. She is partially blind. Before commitment she spent seven months in the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind and was sent here because she was unable to progress. In class she has learned the alphabet and the question mark, but has difficulty because she can spell only two and three letter words. She is sensitive about this handicap. Her hand work is fairly good. She has made sweaters, doll sets, caps, hangers, and scarfs. She made bead necklaces and tile mats very nicely. She shows disappointment when she has to take work out but is not disagreeable about it. She loves music best and is doing well, though she is inclined to use flat fingers and

bang. She is also learning braille music. She is willing to work and likes to help others. She is always talkative and inclined to be jealous and argumentative.

MARTHA is 39 years old and has a Binet (Hayes) score of 14-15 years. She has become blind gradually during her nineteen years in the institution. Although she made good progress in school before her entrance here she was incapable of conforming outside an institution. At present she is partially blind. She learned braille more quickly than anyone else in the class. In one year she mastered plain braille and in the second year contractions. She takes books from the Philadelphia Public Library and now reads for pleasure entirely. She is able to write braille. She knits slowly and not very well and is inclined to think her work better than it is. She has made sweaters, doll sacks and caps, pen wipers, an invalid scarf, and covered coat hangers. She takes patterns for knitting from braille directions. She can do plain hemming and straight seaming, and has made towels, aprons, clothes pin bags, and holders. She has made cut steel and fancy necklaces, working alone and very well. She is apt to attempt too great speed.

PEARL is 12 years old and has a Binet (Hayes) score of 4-5 years. At the time of her entrance seven years ago her eyesight was defective. A diagnosis of congenital cataracts made glasses useless. Although she has partial sight at the present time, it has become progressively worse. Pearl has learned to make six letters but for one of her limited mentality this acquirement has little appeal. She has learned to make braided rugs but can never turn out perfect work alone. She has done well in stringing beads for simple necklaces. Ability to see colors aids her here, but she cannot remember the pattern. She always enjoys the class and never resents doing her work over. Her great hobby is singing and one almost always finds her thus engaged as she strides rather mannishly about the institution.

HILDA is 17 years old with a Binet (Hayes) score of 9-10 years and has partial sight. She entered the class last October and has learned to make twelve braille letters with pegs. She can spell only cat and rat and an attempt is being made to teach her different sounds. Previous to her institution commitment she spent four years in grade 1 and did not progress. At

her mental level she should be able to do better but it is likely that her progress in learning braille will be limited. She learned to knit before coming here and has done some knitting in class. She is a girl who demands a great deal of attention and her adjustment to institution life has been slow. She does not make friends easily. We believe that her interest in this class is helping her to adjust.

ROSE, age 11, has a Binet (Hayes) age of 2-3 years. Her condition of total blindness was noticed at the age of two months. She has been in the class since last October and has learned to fit inch square blocks in a form board and place them right side up. (The right side is marked by a slight circular depression.) She can distinguish square from round blocks and has learned to string beads. The effect of her new interests shows itself in increased talkativeness. She enjoys class and hates to leave at the end of the period.

RACHEL is 12 years old and has a Binet (Hayes) score of 4-5 years. She has been practically blind since the age of four months but can distinguish day from night. Previous to entrance she had few contacts with other children and craved human association. In class she has learned to put pegs in a peg board with grouped holes. At first she laid them on the board without attempting to insert them. She is now learning to arrange them in lines. During the class period she has overheard the other girls learning braille and says that she wants to learn braille letters. She can string round wooden balls, but gets cross if the thread tangles. Rachel has been with the group since last October.

Perhaps the most outstanding characteristics of this group of blind girls are their individual differences. Not only are they unlike in physical age, mental endowment and previous education, but also in personality and emotional reaction. These factors have been considered by Miss Johnson in planning the training for each one. With her own wide knowledge of hand work and teaching methods she has been able to meet their interests and satisfy their craving for self expression.

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